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ABSTRACT

Recent research points out that ability grouping is educationally unsound. It is alien to the principle that students must be provided with continuous educational experiences adjusted to individual rates of development, needs, interests, and personal meaning. In addition, ability grouping leads to stereotyped and stratified roles, and parental, teacher, and peer pressures that could prevent the student from developing healthy social relations and a positive self-concept. This paper examines the research, explores reasons why schools and teachers group homogeneously, and provides some insight into more individualized approaches to learning at all levels. (Author/MLF)

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ABILITY GROUPING IN THE SCHOOLS: A NATIONAL PHENOMENON

by

Stanley Levenson, Ph.D

The grouping of millions of students by ability in U.S. schools is a national phenomenon having no positive research base. Studies dating back to the 1920's provide no hard data for support of ability grouping as a sound educational practice.

This paper will endeavor to present a case against ability grouping in the schools. Evidence will be provided to show that both classroom and within classroom ability groups are a negative practice reinforcing negative attitudes towards school and negative attitudes towards self, while perpetuating segregation in the classroom along ethnic and socio-economic lines.

The first reported use of ability grouping in the United States occurred in 1867 in St. Louis, Missouri.[1] Since that time, millions of teachers in thousands of schools have utilized and continue to utilize some form of ability grouping in grades Kindergarten through 12. In fact, it has been estimated that more then 77 percent of school districts in the United States use ability grouping today.[2]

The following definition of ability grouping will be used for the purposes of this paper:

> Ability grouping is the practice of organizing classroom groups or within classroom groups of students who have most nearly the same standing on measures or judgements of learning achievement or capability. These groups sometimes referred to as homogeneous groups, tracks, or streams are generally organized on a semester or yearly basis.

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The definition as stated above should not be confused with short-term instructional groups organized for the purpose of meeting a specific educational need on a diagnostic prescriptive basis, and then disbanded when the need is met.

Ability groups in many classrooms across the country are sometimes referred to by other names in an attempt to disguise the level of the group. For example: Names such as "Bluebirds", "Redbirds", and "Robins" are used to mean "High", "Middle", and "Low" reading groups at the elementary school level, while English "X", "Y" or "Z" are also used to designate the same grouping patterns in English classes at the secondary school level.

My own research[3] as well as the research of Luchins and Luchins[4] indicates that regardless of names given to ability groups, students know which group they are in. Combs[5], and Rosenthal and Jacobson[6] have also pointed out that once students are placed into a low group or track, they generally remain in that low group or track throughout the elementary or secondary school. In addition, Combs[7] feels that when children are grouped according to ability, there is a tendency to establish and reinforce the individual's concept of his (her) ability in a particular area, and to perpetuate it from that time. This feeling by Combs has been reinforced by Rosenthal and Jacobson[8] in their popular study reported in Pygmalion in the Classroom where they found that membership in a given group or track, like membership in a disadvantaged group, or like a particular I.Q. score, is a source of teacher expectation about a pupil's intellectual ability, and students tend to perform "up to" or "down to" these expectations.

Borg[9] in one of the first large-scale studies investigated a number of academic and personality variables as they relate to ability and random grouping for children ranked as superior, average, and slow. His results showed that heterogeneous grouping favored concepts of self, feelings of belonging, and reduction in antisocial tendencies for all ranks.

Goldberg, Passow, and Justman[10] examined the effects of ability grouping in 45 New York City elementary schools, and found that classes that included all ability levels generally had superior attainment to that of other specified grouping patterns. They concluded that the presence of gifted students, regardless of the ability range of the class, had a positive effect on the non-gifted students in both achievement and personality factors, such as self-attitude, interests, and school attitude.

In 1969, Findley and Bryan[11] undertook a major study for the United States Office of Education to synthesize as best they could the status and impact of ability grouping over a fifty year period from 1920 through 1970. One of the major conclusions they reached was that ability grouping as practiced produces conflicting evidence of usefulness in promoting improved scholastic achievement in superior groups, and almost uniformly unfavorable evidence for promoting scholastic achievement in average or low-achieving groups. They also found that although approval of ability grouping is widespread among teachers, disproportionate numbers (87%) express preference for teaching mixed, average, or superior classroom groups over teaching lower achieving groups. It appears that students in most low ability groups are denied the opportunity of having teachers who would prefer to work with them. The implications of this finding are very significant. That is, most teachers teaching low ability groups are not there by

choice and would rather work with other kinds of students.

Findley and Bryan also found that socio-economic and social class differences are increased by ability grouping practices and decreased by heterogeneous grouping. They indicate that data from court cases as well as school surveys show high socio-economic groups and mainstream ethnic groups overrepresented in high-ability groups or tracks, while low-socio-economic groups and most ethnic minorities are overrepresented in low-ability groups or tracks.

It is quite apparent in examining Findley's and Bryan's research over the span of fifty years (1920-1970) that ability grouping makes no significant difference on academic achievement. However, differences do exist in the affective areas involving attitudes, feelings, self-concept, and segregation of students.

During the 1960's and continuing until today, a number of researchers, educators, State Departments of Education, professional organizations and Civil Rights Groups, have taken a renewed interest in studying the negative effects of ability grouping from an affective perspective while speaking out on the issues. Esposito[12] in examining studies since 1960 indicated that desirable attitudes and self-concepts of children of low ability may be seriously impaired as a result of ability grouping while the self-esteem of high ability children tends to be artificially inflated. LaBenne and Greene[13] reported that ability grouping and the methods it employs are detrimental to self-concept. They emphasize the need to use the individual child as his (her) own standard and further state that all efforts to reduce the range of differences in children over a sustained period of time are failure-oriented. They also feel that whether we group children on the

basis of age, achievement, or mental tests, wide differences still persist.

Holloway[14] feels that intelligence test scores frequently used to brand or label children, determine the quality of their education by relegating them to homogeneous groups. Whether these groups are perceived of as high or low-achieving clusters, creates, she states, in our public schools and intolerable and undemocratic social hierarchy. Those who are relegated to inferior groups, she states, suffer a sense of self-doubt and often a deeper feeling of inferiority. Those in top groups, Holloway feels, often develop a feeling of superiority and snobbery and a false sense of self.

Mercer[15] argued in 1974 that the use of intelligence testing to separate children of "lower" ability from those of "higher" ability tends to maintain and enhance differential advantages of those from Anglo American mainstream and further serves to "explain" the continuing lower scholastic achievement of minority group children.

Mercer's arguments as well as those of Holloway are strongly supported by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights[16] in a paper entitled "Fulfilling the Letter and the Spirit of the Law" published in 1976 which states that the most common cause of classroom segregation is the educational practice of ability grouping. The Commission further goes on to state:

> Rather than providing an environment for meeting a variety of needs of individual students in each group, ability grouping assumes that students are equal in terms of needs and capabilities. Furthermore, teachers of low ability groups frequently are unprepared to teach these classes and generally have low expectations of their students. Course content may be watered down and stimulation from more academically prepared students is nonexistent.

The findings of Mercer, Holloway and the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights are also supported by the California State Department of Education[17] in a 1979 publication entitled Instructional Grouping Practices Related to Students' Special Needs which cites Section 3934 of the California Administrative Code, Title 5:

3934. Isolation and Segregation of Pupils. (a) No program utilizing consolidated application funding shall sanction, perpetuate or promote the segregation of students on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, or socio-economic status.

(b) No program utilizing consolidated application funds shall:

(1) Create special tracks for the educationally disadvantaged.

(2) Establish adjustment, pregrade, or junior grade classes for the educationally disadvantaged; or

(3) Physically isolate children from their classmates on a scheduled daily basis, except in the following instances:

(A) At the elementary level, children who are assigned to a regular classroom teacher responsible for their instructional program may be moved temporarily to a physical location other than the regular classroom, provided that such assignment is based on a comprehensive diagnostic assessment of student needs until the diagnosed need has been alleviated. Such an alternate physical location includes,but is not limited to, a reading laboratory, a mathematics laboratory, a bilingual-bicultural learning center, an intergroup education learning center, a diagnostic clinic, or similar facilities where the specific needs of the student may best be served.

(B) At the secondary level, students may be assigned to a special class for one or more periods or their equivalent, provided that such assignment is based on a comprehensive diagnostic assessment of student needs and such assignment will terminate when the diagnosed need has been alleviated.

The publication goes on to state:

> While the provisions of Section 3934 of the Administrative Code, Title 5, are directed only at programs receiving funds through the consolidated application, the Department of Education believes that school districts should conduct all programs in accordance with these provisions, regardless of funding source or sources.

In my own research (Levenson[18]), I have studied the effects of ability grouping in reading on attitudes, feelings and self-concept. A sample population of 60 sixth grade students (30 students from high reading groups and 30 students from low reading groups) was randomly selected from an

original population of 360 sixth grade students drawn from 12 classrooms, in six schools, in three school districts in San Diego County, California. The tests used for the study were: The Piers-Harris Children's Self-Corcept Scale; The San Diego County Inventory of Reading Attitude; and "The Way I Feel About Reading in Ability Groups" (an interview schedule developed by the investigator).

Significant differences between high and low reading groups were found in attitudes toward reading, self-concept and deep feelings. In addition, both the high and low reading groups agreed on such items in the interview schedule as wanting to choose books themselves rather than having the teacher choose books for them to read; preferring to read silently rather than reading aloud; feeling that they could read more books if they were not in a reading group; preferring to read on their own rather than reading in groups; and feeling that they could relieve some of their nervousness, tension, embarrassment, and stuttering if they were not in a reading group.

I concluded from the study that the teaching of reading in ability groups is educationally unsound. It is alien to the principle that students must be provided with continuous educational experiences adjusted to individual rates of development, needs, interests, and personal meaning. Whether we group children by age, achievement, or mental tests, wide differences still persist. The results also showed that ability grouping leads to stereotyped and stratified roles, and parental, teacher, and peer pressures that could prevent the student from developing healthy social relations and a positive self-concept. It is also possible, I concluded, that the students in low groups in many instances may incorporate the teachers' judgment of their current status and ability and begin to behave according to these expectations.

Where do we go from here? It appears that the recent movement towards competency testing in California and elsewhere is fostering teaching strategies in many school districts that incorporate ability grouping, remedial classes, and other negative grouping practices. Rather than moving away from this practice, it seems we are moving towards it. A number of monographs including those of Findley and Bryan[19] and the recent California State Department of Education[20] publication are indicating that within classroom ability groups in specific academic subjects may have some advantages. While both publications also go on to say that such grouping patterns should only be considered as temporary, the research cited elsewhere in this paper tends to reinforce the concept that most homogeneous groups remain rather constant. Therefore, any ability grouping, whether it be whole classroom groups or within classroom groups should be scrutinized very carefully and avoided if at all possible.

Jeannette Veatch[21], nationally recognized reading consultant and author summarizes the situation this way:

> The practice of "ability-grouping" goes on and on in the face of most experts who admit there is no such thing as an homogeneous group. Why such an unsound practice continues is a result of a shocking situation. Ability-grouping is an admission that teachers and/or administrators cannot, will not, or do not know how to deal with individual differences. Ability-grouping then, is a symptom, a sign of poor teaching.

While I don't agree entirely with Veatch's observations, I too must ask why so many teachers in so many schools continue to use ability grouping? It appears that there are two factors contributing to the phenomenon. First, Wilson & Schmits[22] point out that teachers have not been exposed to the relevant research on this topic and that they are more influenced by their experience and apparent logic of ability grouping than by the research.

I would contend that most school administrators are also unfamiliar with the research, and they too are influenced by what appears to be the expediency

of placing students into ability groups without understanding the consequences.

Second, in my own research I have found that many teachers at both the elementary school and secondary school levels have never learned how to work with heterogeneous groups. However, if given in-service education opportunities, they are very receptive to trying out new and innovative ideas.

What are some advantages of heterogeneous grouping? The California State Department of Education[22] lists six major advantages:

1. Heterogeneous grouping may provide for a more democratic learning situation and living situation than does homogeneous grouping.

2. In a system of heterogeneous grouping, no stigma is placed on those children who would be assigned to the lowest groups or tracks in a homogeneous grouping situation.

3. Experiences for children in heterogeneous groups help prepare them to cope with "real-life" situations by involving them with people whose race, culture, ethnicity, and so forth may be different from their own.

4. Students often benefit greatly from working with other students whose ability level is different from their own; that is, students learn from their peers.

5. In classrooms in which children are grouped on a heterogeneous basis, teachers are less likely to develop the belief that all students are similar in terms of their social needs, achievement, and learning styles. Each student receives instruction and other services in accordance with his or her needs and abilities.

6. By its very nature, heterogeneous grouping prevents the segregation of children on the basis of socioeconomic status, ethnicity, sex, race, and the like.

In addition to the advantages listed above, heterogeneous grouping in our schools also affords the teaching staff with opportunities to be creative and to motivate and stimulate all youngsters to achieve their maximum potential, to feel good about themselves, to develop favorable attitudes, and to love school. Heterogeneous grouping also fosters such diverse teaching strategies as individualized instruction, team teaching, individually programmed

instruction, peer tutoring, cross-age tutoring, community and parent volunteer help, and the language experience approach to reading and writing.

It would seem that in a heterogeneous classroom, where all students are treated as individuals, we should work toward accomodating individual differences through appropriate educational experiences. A quality education that is to provide for the unique growth of each child will increase rather than decrease the individual differences among students. In fact, the only "real" teacher lies within the learners and the feelings and beliefs they hold about themselves induce selectivity in what is perceived and how it is interpreted.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this paper, I have attempted to provide a research base for rejecting the notion of using both classroom and within classroom ability grouping in the schools. I have searched the literature from 1920 through 1979 and have found no positive reinforcement for this common educational practice in American schools.

In conclusion, it is strongly recommended that we take heed of the research findings and help teachers to develop alternative teaching strategies to meet the unique heeds and learning styles of each individual student within a heterogeneous environment.

The End

NOTES

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(continued)

NOTES (cont'd)

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19 Findley and Bryan, op. cit.

20 California State Department of Education, op. cit. p. 3.

21 Jeannette Veatch, Reading in the Elementary School, New York, The Ronald Press, 1966. p. 191.

22 Barry J. Wilson and Donald W. Schmits, "What's New in Ability Grouping," Phi Delta Kappan, Bloomington, IN, April 1978. pp. 535-36.

23 California State Department of Education, op. cit. p. 2.